

Vermont Payment for Ecosystem Services and Soil Health Working Group

Summary of Meeting #34: Tuesday, January 3, 2022

More detailed information, including any presentation slides and the meeting recording can be found at <https://agriculture.vermont.gov/pes>.

Introduction

The Payment for Ecosystem Services (PES) and Soil Health Working Group held its thirty-fourth meeting on Tuesday, January 3, 2022, via Zoom. The objectives of the meeting were to update the full Working Group on pilot development and progress related to drafting the final report.

Summary of discussion

First, Ryan Patch (VAAFM) updated the Working Group on the work of the pilot development subtask group. The Working Group gave the following directions for the pilot program at the last meeting:

1. Focus on paying for meeting thresholds, rather than units;
2. Combine annual state payments for year 2 on into one lump sum (though CSP clients will continue to receive annual federal payments);
3. Not target any particular resource concerns but give farmers flexibility to choose among the existing NRCS state and nationwide resource concern prioritization framework for CSP; and
4. Include a review at the end of year 1 to assess program success and any lessons learned for future phases.

Mr. Patch also noted that this pilot could be the first phase in a multi-phase approach, and that subsequent phases could include applications for resources under NRCS' Resource Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP).

Working Group members raised concerns about the availability of technical assistance, even with the provision of an additional FTE technical assistance position with the pilot funds. At the same time, NRCS Vermont is committed to supporting CSP. Additionally, increased funding from the federal Inflation Reduction Act for CSP is coming on-stream, some of which could support additional NRCS planners in upcoming fiscal years. Working Group members also advised that the diagrams shared to explain the pilot could be made clearer.

The Working Group also considered that the number of applicants for the pilot could exceed the initially estimated twenty and that a strictly first-come-first-serve approach might not incentivize equitably. Therefore, the Working Group directed that the pilot retain the \$2,000 planning completion payment and advertise ranges for the contract-signing and incentive payment for new enrollments and incentive payment for existing agricultural CSP clients. (The \$1,500 contract signing component should also be kept in place.)

Afterward, CBI facilitators updated the Working Group on report drafting progress. Comments received from Working Group members on the most recent draft included:

- Fleshing out the definition of ecosystem services

- Discussing the conceptual limitations of PES
- Clarifying the difference between climate regulation and resilience
- Reordering the report for readability
- Explaining the CART tool
- Making the section on a price for a unit of soil health more legible to the layperson
- Including the estimate of the cost to the state
- Writing an executive summary

Working Group members also suggested including a section highlighting challenges that the Working Group encountered along its journey, including:

- Length of the process being longer than anticipated
- Difference between outcome and initial vision due to circumstance and ultimate funding source
- Difficulty clarifying consensus at certain points
- Inability to talk to farmers about the pilot sooner in the process
- Incomplete transparency around the selection of a technical services contractor
- Narrowness of the scope of ecosystem services assessed
- Lack of diversity of membership and thought on the Working Group (dominance of “Western” thought processes)
- How and whether to assess biodiversity in the program
- Measurement versus modeling approaches
- Creating a new program versus leveraging existing programs
- Market-based ecosystem services versus ecosystem processes and relationships

Members were encouraged to share about the report in their discussions with legislators and during their organizations’ annual meetings. Deputy Secretary Alyson Eastman (VAAF) also noted that the Agency typically meets with chairs of the relevant legislative committees early in their terms and that the work of this Working Group would be a highlight of those conversations.

CBI facilitators also offered to prepare a slide show version of the report for Working Group members to use in their outreach activities.

The meeting was adjourned at 2 PM. The next meeting will take place on January 10 via Zoom.

Links shared

1. [Meeting recording](#)